

On Some Insights Gained Through An Arabic Reading of Epigraphic Tadmuraean Aramaic

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We all know that the prevailing paradigm of the history of the Mashriqian languages¹ lies on its death bed, exhausted, overwhelmed by the constant flow of data that the archaeologists have uncovered, and still uncover, from all over the Mashriq of the Arab World. We process the data at our disposal with all the theoretical ingenuity we can muster, but the field is so vast, and our habit of dealing piecemeal with it so deeply entrenched, that the understanding in gestation is slow to take shape, even its outline yet unclear. In this predicament, any heuristic help we can get should be welcome.

In this paper I would like to share a perspective that sheds some new light upon part of the field. It is the perspective provided by teaching, in Arabic and to Arabic speaking students, the Ancient Mashriqian languages, and more particularly, the corpus of the Palmyrene Aramaic inscriptions.

Looking at Aramaic through Arabic, and, as a corollary, reflecting upon Arabic in the light of Aramaic, provides a perspective that cannot fail to elicit, even if by serendipity, some insights and reflections into the variegated and complex relationship linking the two overarching linguistic realities that we refer to as Aramaic and Arabic. For instance, what should we make of the feeling of "recognition" that a native speaker of the modern Lebanese vernacular often has when dealing, in Arabic, with the Aramaic of the inscriptions found at Tadmur/Palmyra, or of his/her impression, acquired with increased familiarity with the material, that her/his vernacular is as strikingly akin to Tadmuraean Aramaic as it is to Classical Arabic, and closer to the former than to the latter?

Such observations do not square well with some of the main tenets of our old paradigm for the reconstruction of the history of Arabic and of the so-called "NeoArabic" dialects. Attempting to account for these observations within a coherent historical framework provides us with some interesting leads for further research.

Let us try to flesh up this claim. We will start by a description of the “*Diwān Nuṣūṣ Tadmur*”, the tool developed to teach, in Arabic, and to Arabic speaking Lebanese students, Epigraphic Tadmuraean Aramaic, and whose elaboration, as well as use, provided the above-mentioned heuristic change in perspective. The “*Diwān Nuṣūṣ Tadmur*” is a chrestomathy of just over 200 of the complete, near-complete and/or satisfactorily restored Aramaic inscriptions from Tadmur/Palmyra and its vicinity. It was completed in 1990, and, since then, used in conjunction with a dictionary (Jean et Hoftijzer, 1965) and a grammar (Cantineau, 1935), in a third year undergraduate course at the archaeology department of the Lebanese University.²

Since the linguistic methodology followed in the “*Diwān Nuṣūṣ Tadmur*” has been presented elsewhere (Naccache, *forth. a*), we can concentrate here upon highlighting those elements of the configuration of this collection, and of its use as a teaching tool, that proved instrumental in providing a new point of view upon the subject. All these elements have one thing in common, they are all derived from the constant linguistic switching between Epigraphic Tadmuraean Aramaic (ETA), modern Standard Arabic (MSA, the version of literary Arabic with which the students are familiar) and modern Lebanese vernacular (MLV, an abstraction from the various local speech forms current in Lebanon today, and an instance of the *Bilād aš-sām* vernacular, or modern Arabic dialect), that is both embodied in the “*Diwān*”, and enforced by its use as a teaching aid.

When used by Arabic-speaking Lebanese students, the “*Diwān*” taps into the ‘competence in interglossic transfer’ (Dichy, 1994), which the students have long-since acquired through daily and repeatedly switching between the MLV and MSA instances of the Arabic continuum. While reading, in parallel, vocalised ETA texts and their Arabic rendering, the students are automatically and unavoidably required to call upon their acquired mechanism of interglossic transfer. The teaching approach that is followed takes advantage of this ability the students have to subliminally perceive the lexical, morphological and syntactical patterns of correspondence between MLV and MSA, and to act automatically upon these patterns to switch from one instance to the other. For these students, the attentive reading of vocalised Aramaic in this familiar context helps them progressively to extend their “field of switching” to embrace ETA. This easy propaedeutic is then bolstered and methodologically grounded through the recourse to dictionaries and grammar books.

To give a clearer idea of how this approach is implemented, we will examine a sample of the material as it appears in the “*Diwān*” (fig. 1). Each inscription

١٢٦٦٦ ١٢٦٦٦ ١٢٦٦٦ ١٢٦٦٦ ١٢٦٦٦ ١٢٦٦٦ ١٢٦٦٦ ١٢٦٦٦ ١٢٦٦٦ ١٢٦٦٦
 أ. بيرح الول شنت ٣٢٨ صلما دنه / دي عزيزو بر يديعبل بركي
 ب. بَيْرِحَ الْوَلِ شَنْتَ ٣٢٨ صَلَمًا دَنَهْ دِي "عَزِيزُو" بَرَّ "يُدِيعَ بَلَّ بَرَكِي"
 ج. بشهر ايلول سنة ٣٢٨ الصم هذا لـ "عزيز" بر "يديع بل بركي"

١٢٦٦٦ ١٢٦٦٦ ١٢٦٦٦ ١٢٦٦٦ ١٢٦٦٦ ١٢٦٦٦ ١٢٦٦٦ ١٢٦٦٦ ١٢٦٦٦ ١٢٦٦٦
 أ. دي من بني متبول دي اقيم له يديعبل / بره
 ب. دِي مِّنْ بَنِي "مَتَّ بُول" دِي اَقِيْمْ لَهْ "يُدِيعَ بَلَّ" بَرَّهْ
 ج. الذي من بني "مت بول" الذي اقام له "يديع بل" ابنه

صَلَمًا : الصم، بمعنى التمثال، دون دلالة العبادة له.

اَقِيْمْ : فعل في صيغة الماضي (هو)، على وزن اَفْعَلْ، من الجذر ق و م /.

Figure 1: A sample from "Diwān Nuṣūṣ Tadmur".

is presented in four formats or lines, the first being a copy of the

inscription in Tadmuraean script, the second its transliteration in Arabic letters, the third its transcription in Arabic script, and the fourth its "isomorphic transform" into the morphologically congruent Arabic words. These four lines are followed by notes providing the grammatical analysis of verbs and deverbal nouns, and, when appropriate, commentaries.

Line 1 is a copy, in a Tadmuraean script, of the original inscription.³ Its intended function is not to familiarise the students with the ETA script, though it does that, but, for reasons that will be made clear in what follows, to serve as a

constant reminder to the students that these are ancient texts that should not be read as Arabic. In conjunction with line 2, it also helps the students overcome their deeply ingrained confusion between script and language. This confusion is illustrated by the efforts most students have to expend in order to overcome their first impression that line 1 is in Aramaic and line 2 in Arabic. Explaining that line 1 is simply computer-generated from line 2 by copying it in a changed font is not, by itself, enough to have them accept that both are transliterations differing only in the fonts used to produce them. Although they have already spent a year with Ezra and Daniel in the Kittel Bible's format, it is only after the students have become familiar with the "Diwān" that they finally internalise the fact that script and language are not to be confused.

The transliteration in line 2 is neutral in the matter of the phonetic realisation of the letters. The mapping of the 22 Aramaic letters into 22 of the 28 Arabic letters is straightforward. Since we are dealing with epigraphic Aramaic, Aramaic *s* has been transliterated as Arabic *s*, and Aramaic *š* as Arabic *š* (no *hamza* is used in the transliteration, only *aleph s*). This option is supported by comparing the Eastern *abġad* arrangement of the letters of the Arabic alphabet with the Aramaic alphabet (Churchyard, 1993, p 318).

Using the "Diwān" in the classroom has convinced me that Lebanese students need specific guidance on how to use ETA texts in Arabic transliteration properly. This is because the consonantal skeleton of ETA, stripped of its vocalisation, shares so much with the consonantal skeleton of the Arabic continuum that it is confusing to the learner, whose first and overwhelming tendency is to read ETA texts transliterated in Arabic script as if they were Arabic texts, written in the Arabic language! This is why beginners should not read the transliteration, but use it solely as a base from which to work out their analysis of the inscription. This analysis is then embodied in the transcription in line 3.

The transcription proposed in line 3 represents, expressed within the conventions of the Arabic script, the proposal made by the epigraphist for how the original graphemes were realised in speech⁴, i.e., it represents a reading of the text. Because the "Diwān" is intended for teaching purpose, the readings found in it are rarely original, and in an overwhelming majority of cases simply transcribe in Arabic the readings adopted by the primary editors⁵. The only originality claimed here is that transcriptions are used in the "Diwān" for whole inscriptions, while in the field of Aramaic studies they are usually limited to one-word commentaries. This means that the Arab readers are provided with a vocalised ETA text in the script with which they are familiar, and in whose medium all their acquired mechanisms of "interglossic transfer" are grounded.

Given the repetitive nature of most of the inscriptions and the ease with

which the inscriptions transcribed in Arabic can be read, the students grasp the language of ETA very quickly. After reading a score of inscriptions, they are encouraged to use the transliterations to work transcriptions out for themselves. Observing the results of these efforts has led me to the following remarks about the students performance in switching between ETA, MLV and MSA:

- The students do pay special attention to what, from their point of view, are the most exotic parts of speech, such as the verbs and derived nouns. After just a few weeks of using the “*Diwān*”, the root, stem and form of the great majority of these words would be quickly identified, and the word therefore correctly vocalised. However the same is not true of the most common parts of speech. It is thus a long battle to get even the most perceptive student to vocalise consistently the ubiquitous *lh* as *leh* (Aramaic) and not as *lahu* (Arabic).
- The students take very easily to the ‘Aramaic characteristic’ of starting a word with an unvocalised consonant, a characteristic that MLV shares with Aramaic. However, a rather frequent observation was that, while trying to vocalise in Aramaic a word shared by ETA, MLV and MSA, the student would come up with an MSA vocalisation and not with “their” MLV vocalisation, even though that last might be a better approximation. It is as if, since the students’ switching mechanism between ETA and MLV is not yet well established, they fall back on the much used MLV to MSA switch.
- Finally there are two related problems that the Arab-speaking Lebanese students have to face while dealing with the transcription of ETA texts. The first is the difference in spelling conventions between ETA and MSA. The second is that in the case of shared roots there is an ever-present possibility of a semantic shift between ETA and MLV or MSA. The students are helped to confront these problems by having to produce the “isomorphic transform” represented in line 4.

Line 4, or, as I propose to call it, the “isomorphic transform” is a step justified and made possible by the congruence that exists between “Aramaic” and “Arabic” morphology. Having noticed my own reliance on an “interglossic transfer” mechanism while learning “Semitic” at U.C.B., the “isomorphic transform” is a step I started implementing since 1987, both in teaching and for Arabic editions of ancient Mashriqian texts. Its foundation, in the present case, is that all the morphological set of ETA is mappable in a one-to-one, unambiguous and reciprocal relationship onto the MSA morphological set,⁶ the only two non-

essential deviations being that the verbal stem ${}^{\circ}itf{}^{\circ}el / {}^{\circ}ift{}^{\circ}el$ of ETA maps onto both the ${}^{\circ}ifta{}^{\circ}ala$ and the ${}^{\circ}infa{}^{\circ}ala$ stems of MSA, and that ETA's $\bar{d}\bar{i}$ has a dozen MSA correspondents.

The production of the "isomorphic transform" is straightforward and does not entail the investment of any new effort in analysis, since all the information required to perform it has already been specified while producing the transcription, that is at the point when all the words of the inscription were analysed. Based on this analysis all that the operation of transformation requires is to produce, the MSA word equivalent to the ETA word. Interestingly it is possible, in a large number of cases, to produce the word in MSA garb from the very same root as was used in ETA.

It is worth noting that from a linguistic point of view, the "isomorphic transform" could have targeted MLV rather than MSA, i.e., produced words in their vernacular form, both options being methodologically equivalent. The choice of MSA is political, not linguistic. It does not prevent the students, while practising in the classroom or alone, from performing this operation in two steps, first from ETA to their congenial MLV, and then, "automatically", from MLV to MSA when writing down the result.

The result of the "isomorphic transform" is a text which is comprehensible with minimal effort by the students, even though - and this is important - the syntactic structure of this text is still that of its epigraphic original. This text is comprehensible because all of its words are in correct MSA (or MLV), and because the difference in syntax between ETA and MLV is not qualitatively different from that prevailing today between the ideal (the syntax of Classical Arabic, CA) and the practice (the various syntaxes of MLV, or even of one of the levels of MSA with which one is confronted daily).

This comprehensibility is one of the most useful aspects of the "isomorphic transform", which is that it results in an instantaneous understanding of the original inscription in an easily recognisable form. This is because line 4 represents, in a familiar form, one's comprehension of the original text, which can be tested against the criteria of coherence and meaning. If line 4 does not make sense, it means something is wrong in line 3, the transcription, which means that we have to re-analyse line 2, the transliteration, and come up with a different analysis of the words in ETA, repeating the process till a satisfactory reading is achieved.

This constant and active interglossic switching forces the student constantly to compare ETA, MLV and MSA. It is this compulsory process of comparison that we referred to as the perspective opened to the user of the "Diwān". Now, as

a matter of course, such comparisons lead to evaluation of the similarities or dissimilarities between the things compared. Table 1 presents an overview of the result of such an evaluation, which would be reached by any Arabic speaking Lebanese student working on the ETA corpus as presented in the “Diwān”. It is clear from Table 1 that, by most terms of comparison, MLV would be perceived to be closer to ETA than MSA is.

It needs to be stressed that, when they approach it via the “Diwān”, modern inhabitants of the region consider the Aramaic of the Tadmuraean inscriptions to be a strange variant of their dialect.

Although this impression is of course anachronistic, it is worth examining in the context of our prevailing theories about the history of Arabic, for two reasons. First, because it can help us evaluate the various theories about the origin of the modern Arabic vernaculars, and secondly, because it has some heuristic value that can lead to promising venues for further research. In the remainder of this paper, we will briefly consider each in turn.

The study of the origin of the Arabic vernaculars has stagnated despite the fact that when, and from what, the dialects developed is a crucial question in the field (see Abboud, 1970; Miller, 1986). We have seen that the similarities across all linguistic categories between MLV and ETA, are greater than those between MSA and ETA. This observation is relevant in the context of the study of the origin of the Arabic vernaculars because none of the theoretical explanations that have been used, be it ‘family tree’, substrate influences, parallel developments, ‘wave theory’, diglossic situations or any combinations thereof, could account for an across the board similarity between MLV and ETA if MLV had developed from CA, the *urform* of MSA.

Yet, the assumption that the modern sedentary dialects, or vernaculars have developed from CA has dominated the ~~debate~~ ^{old debate,} for nearly ninety years ~~and~~ which is sometimes traced back to two opposing hypotheses advanced by Nöldeke (1904) and Vollers (1906, notwithstanding his hypothesis about the Koran). The former hypothesis, propounding the development, after the Islamic conquest, of the vernaculars from CA or from a *Koiné* has held sway. It has as many variations as it has advocates (Fück, 1955; Ferguson, 1959a; Blau, 1965; Blau, 1977, Blau, 1981), and now attracts arguments from sociolinguistics (Versteegh, 1984; Ferguson 1989; Hary, 1989; Eksell, 1995). Still, it can be epitomised in the statement that NeoArabic, or the modern vernaculars and with it Arabic diglossia, developed from CA as late as the first Islamic century as a result of the great Arab conquest (Blau, 1977), a statement still commonly found in the literature (Kaye, 1994, 54).

The latter hypothesis, most recently propounded by Corriente, derives the vernaculars from the pre-Islamic languages of “the populations of Syria and Iraq,

	MODERN STANDARD ARABIC	EPIGRAPHIC TADMURAEAN ARAMAIC (ETA)	MODERN LEBANESE VERNACULAR (MLV)
MORPHOLOGY			
VERBS State/tense		shared between the three	b- imperfect (6/12th c. Yemenite influence?)
Stems/form	15 forms, 11 actives	6 forms; 3, plus 3 with -t-infix	midway between MSA and ETA
NOUNS Formation	full range of forms	limited range of forms (NP excluded)	medium range (neologisms)
Numbers	ʿiṭayn yes	one attestation of dual (similar to MLV) trēn no	dual use for nouns (not verbs) tnēn no
SYNTAX	CA and MSA syntax restricted to a few standardised types. Should not be followed when reading an ETA text in “isomorphic transform” (line 4)	not well known, varies with type and date of text, apparently relative fluidity of constructions	ETA texts in “isomorphic transform” more readily understood in MLV due to the latter large choice of syntactical constructions
LEXICAL	Many word survival due to the antiquarian approach of CA lexicography: ziqq ; ḥayr ; ḥafāwa ; ḥassaka ; zaʿūn ; mākis ; nāmūs ; ʿansus; farnas etc	A majority of roots used in ETA are shared with MSA and MLV such as: fṭḥ or ʿḥd / ʿḥd / ʿḥḍ etc. even some derived nouns such as: maḡḡān etc	A number of diagnostic isoglosses link ETA specifically with MLV: dabbar ; balā ; barra ; ḡuwwa ; ḡins ; ḥēyk ; zḡīr ; kīs ; šarḡab etc.

TABLE 1: An a-historical linguistic comparison between ETA, MLV and MSA from the perspective of the “*Diwān Nuṣuṣ Tadmur*”.

who were speakers of Nabafī Arabic or had just been obliged to learn it ...” (1976, 72). This position is bolstered by an analysis of the linguistic nature of the poetic and Koranic *Koinè* which concludes that CA “can never have served any group as their standard speech” (Zwettler, 1978, 148 and n.115-6).

The literature is however replete with equivocations, such as Ferguson’s statements that “it may even be true that a few of the features of the *koiné* (from which the dialects are derived) continued an original state while the corresponding forms of Classical were the innovations” (1959a, 618), or that “Arabic diglossia seems to reach as far back as our knowledge of Arabic goes” (1959b, 327), or Blau’s statement that “if one wants to continue the metaphor of kinship, one will rather consider pre-Islamic standard Arabic and Proto-Neo-Arabic to be ‘sister’ languages, closely related and mutually intelligible.” (1981-2, 223; on Blau’s terminological inconsistencies, see Hary, 1989, 23-6). It is also often stated that it is an “*assumption* (my italics) that all Arabic dialects have developed from the Arabic *Koinè* of the first centuries of the Islamic era” (Garbell, 1959), and there are many cautionary notes about the geographical and substratic diversity of the vernaculars and about the postulated identity of the poetic and Koranic *Koinè* with the postulated spoken “Arabic *Koinè*” (Cohen, 1962, 143, 119).

Even if the two major hypotheses are not mutually exclusive, our observation would best be explained if both Classical Arabic (with or without a *Koinè*) and the vernaculars developed from the same original continuum, that is, within the context of the second hypothesis. That this conclusion could not be framed in a more robust way is a reflection of the weakness of the hypotheses currently dominating the field.

In his introduction to an issue devoted to the methodological and thematic renewal of the field of Arabic studies P. Larcher (1991) noted that, in spite of “the remarkably complex sociolinguistic situation” of the Arabic language, its study has lagged behind the general field of linguistics. The same can be said about the remarkably complex historical situation of Arabic and the dearth of historical studies devoted to it relative to those of Indo-European linguistics. It is in this context that the perspective offered by the “*Diwān*” could have some heuristic value, not only in helping to define the field of study, but also in suggesting ways of approaching it.

One tenet of the dominant paradigm is that CA is of great antiquity.⁷ This led to the assumption that the modern vernaculars were derived from CA. In the sixties, a more realistic historical appreciation of the innovative nature of CA morphology developed (Petráček, 1981), and also, through a re-evaluation of the classical Arabic sources (Blachère, 1958; Baalbaki, 1983; Fleisch, 1984; Langhade, 1994), of the genesis of CA (Zwettler, 1978). In spite of this, Arabic

still often “passes implicitly or explicitly for the starting point of diachronic speculations” (Petráček, 1981, 162 -my translation), if not CA, then “the large number of regional dialects or subdialects (that) existed prior to the written evidence of the establishment of Old Arabic in its pseudo-classical form” (Eksell, 1995, 65). The feeling of familiarity experienced by Lebanese students while reading ETA texts should warn us against such restrictive tendencies, and invite us to widen the horizon of our search.

Even though we are only concerned here with the history of the vernaculars of “*Bilād aš-Šām*”, we should widen the horizon of our search and consider all the available Mashriqian linguistic evidence that has come down to us from this region. Some of this material has been used in the study of the history of Old Arabic and Proto-Arabic, as well as for the study of the development of Arabic writing (Rabin, 1984; Milik, 1985a; Greenfield, 1992; Healey, 1991; Healey, 1993; Robin, 1993a; Robin, 1993b; Gruendler, 1993). From such studies we can now say with Rabin that “geographically, through its earlier appearance in the Syrian Desert, and grammatically, as well as lexico-statistically, Arabic is closer to the North-West Semitic languages, especially to Aramaic, but the relation has not yet been fully worked out.” (1984, 131). We now also classify Proto-Arabic together with Canaanite in the *ha(n)*-dialects category in opposition to the Aramaic dialects that make up the *-ā* category (Milik, 1985b), but observe the gradual transition from Nabataean Aramaic to Arabic (Healey and Smith, 1989; Greenfield, 1992), within the historical framework of a spectrum of Aramaic dialects (Cook, 1992). And we should not forget Syriac sources, which, in their earliest attestation (Maricq, 1962) display the same relations with MLV as does ETA, and which provide us with rich palaeographic (Desreumaux, 1987), sociological (Lavenant, 1983; Segal, 1984; Troupeau, 1991) and linguistic sources (Bar-Asher, 1988).

It is evidence from all these linguistic sources and not simply from Old-Arabic that should form the “continuum of dialects with its fluctuations and shifts (which) we should courageously admit to be the origin of Old Arabic, instead of looking for the miraculous missing dialect or *Koiné* form” (Eksell, 1995, 65), and we would add, not only the origin of Old Arabic, but of Neo-Arabic too. It is only a derivation from such a dialect continuum, of which ETA was part, that could explain MLV’s relationship with ETA.

But how are we to organise and deal with such a tremendous mass of disparate data? Here again the perspective offered by the “*Diwān*” suggests ways of approaching the problem. The disjunction that is apparent between the historical situation implied by our observation and the one derived from the

hypotheses of the prevailing paradigm has some interesting implications. To reconstruct a coherent representation of the historical and sociological linguistic situation that lead to the present outcome, it will not be enough to import models and theories developed to account for the Indo-European languages, however rich these are (Parker, 1983; Kahane, 1986; TARRIER, 1991; Chambers, 1992). This is illustrated by contrasting the shortcomings of the application of the pidginization creolization decreolization model to the Arabic domain (Versteegh, 1984; Ferguson, 1989) with the amazingly rich and complex picture of the present day sociolinguistic situation of the speakers of Arabic that emerges from a methodologically aware attempt to account directly for the specificity of the subject (Dichy, 1994).

Unfortunately, when we turn to historical situations, we are not offered this opportunity to generate new data "at will", but have to squeeze whatever we can from the material that has come to us through tradition or archaeology. To do so we should be ready to deconstruct the traditionally accepted histories. This rewarding process, illustrated in a connected field by M. Sharon's (1988) iconoclastic but highly stimulating reappraisal of the birth of Islam as a historical and sociological phenomenon, should equally embrace the standing representations and their epistemological grounding.

Here again, and this will be our concluding point, the fact that the modern Lebanese vernacular has so much affinity with the language written at Tadmur nearly two millennia ago can be exploited to some heuristic end. This fact is very hard to account for from within the traditional classification of the "Semitic" languages, which is predicated upon a common, punctual origin and a cladistic model of linguistic development, as illustrated by this archetype of "cladograms", or branching diagrams, the "family tree". Within such a model the modern Arabic vernaculars could be derived either from Arabic or from Aramaic, both choices being mutually exclusive, because "the logic of cladism, and the graphics derived from that logic, demand that each entity must have one and only one parent" (Moore, 1994, 929). Such a restriction in the spectrum of possibilities has no justifications in the field of human social history, which is replete with all kind of combinations and alternations, all kind of separation and recombination. Therefore, to account for our finding and be able to represent its historical development in a coherent context, we have to abandon the cladistic genealogies and look for alternatives, such as the "rhyzotic theories (which) emphasise the extent to which each human language, culture, or population is considered to be derived from or rooted in several different antecedent groups" (ib., 925). Two examples of rhyzotic diagrams are illustrated in figure 2, the first a model of the channels of a river separating and recombining in a complex fashion, the second a

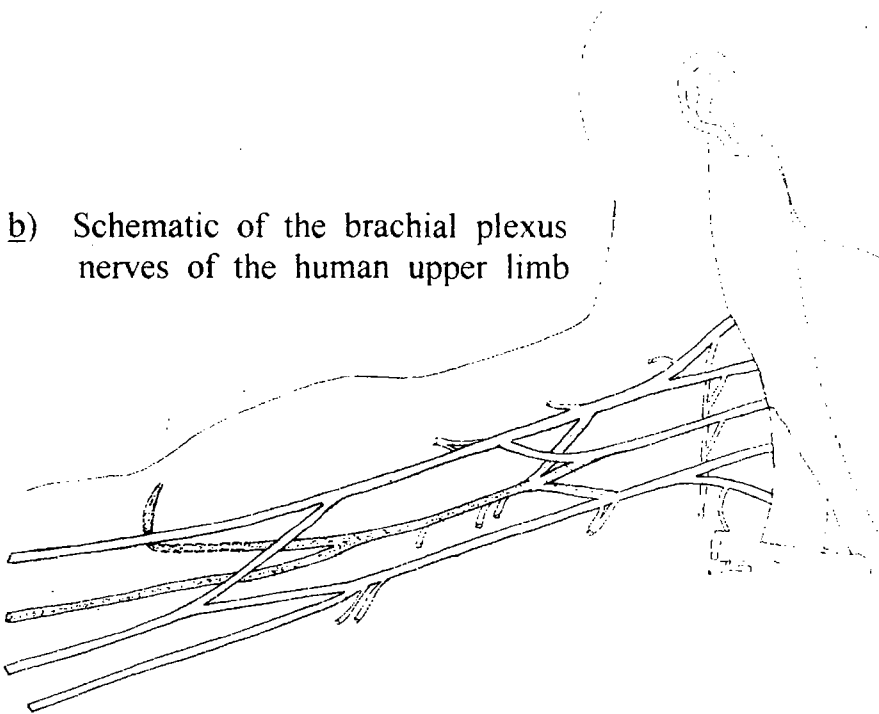
schemata of the brachial plexus of the nerves of the human upper limb.

This is the kind of diagram we would need in order to represent the historical path

followed by the vernaculars of “*Bilād aš-Sām*”, whose roots can be traced back to Canaanite, Proto-Arabic and Aramaic, with other influences not to be excluded, who went back and forth through many linguistic levels and had many social carriers, and who had been in prolonged contact with Classical Arabic, with all what that contact implies of dominance, resistance and adaptation. This and more we should include in our representation if we want it to do justice to the genius of a language nearly two thousand years old.



a) Channels of a river separating and recombining
(adapted from Moore, 1994)



b) Schematic of the brachial plexus
nerves of the human upper limb

Figure 2: Two examples of rhyzotic diagrams

Notes

- ¹ The proposal to replace “Semitic” by “Mashriqian” was advanced in order to avoid an ethnic reference in the naming of language families, and to fit in with the general linguistic practice that uses a geographic and not an ethnic referent to name language families (Naccache, 1985). The name “Mashriq” was chosen because it is the name used by the local inhabitants to refer to the large area comprising the Arabian Peninsula and the Fertile Crescent - the Mashriq of the Arab World. Such a practice, followed when naming as “Sayhadic” the languages “virtually confined to the areas west, south and east of the Sayhad sand desert” (Beeston, 1981, 179), would furthermore fit very well with the higher and lower levels terms in current use, such as AfroAsiatic or North-West or Central.
- ² Since joining, in September 1986, the faculty of the Archaeology department of the Lebanese University, and although I consider myself a historian, I have been teaching, in Arabic, five courses: - a general introduction to the Ancient Mashriqian Languages, - an introduction to Biblical Aramaic, - an Aramaic follow-up, - an Introduction to Akkadian, - and an Akkadian follow-up. This curriculum has been described elsewhere (Naccache, *forth. b*). The Tadmuraean Aramaic course has served till now as the Aramaic follow-up.
- ³ The Tadmuraean script that has been scanned to generate the computer font used in line 1 was taken from the column “AD 232” of Cantineau’s table of Palmyrene scripts. There is no overriding justification for this choice, apart from the fact that any choice would have been equally arbitrary.
- ⁴ Contrary to a widespread misconception, there is no problem in representing the Ancient Mashriqian Languages in the Arabic script. This script has a convenient and well established way of representing the three vowels /a/, /u/ and /i/ in both short and full length. As for the *imēleh* /e/, known to grammarians at least since Sibawaih, and routinely written down in editions of the Koran, I have simply chosen a graphic implementation that reflects more its phonetic nature than the one used in the Koran (in differentiating between /e/ and /ē/ the same convention is used as that between /a/ and /ā/). And finally, it is interesting to note that the realisation of /ā/ as /ō/, which, in any case, is non-morphological and non-binding, though not indicated in this transcription scheme, is heard when the texts are read by students from specific areas of Lebanon.
- ⁵ Where the reading of a word differs from the one offered by the primary editors, the adopted reading is explained in the accompanying notes.
- ⁶ The reverse is not true, and the MSA set is much larger than the ETA one.
- ⁷ Thus we read in a paper presented in 1965, “Until the appearance of Mohammed, the Arabs lived to a great extent in almost complete isolation from the outer world... This accounts for the *prima facie* astonishing fact that Classical Arabic, though appearing on the stage of history hundreds of years after Canaanite and Aramaic, nevertheless in many respects has a more archaic structure than these Old Semitic languages. The Arabs, being almost completely insulated from external influences and living under the same primitive conditions as their ancestors, preserved the ancient form of their speech...” (Blau, 1969, 38).

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